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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: Gabon: Discontent May Close Schools Early

Ref: 08 Libreville 229

Summary

¶1. (U) Since tense negotiations ended a primary and secondary teachers' strike in December 2008, the problems facing Gabon's education sector have multiplied and spread to higher education. University professors are now on strike, demanding better pay and working conditions, and their colleagues at the primary and secondary level threaten to join them if a recently promised salary supplement is not deposited into their bank accounts by May 25. A strike would render thousands of high school students ineligible to take their final exams, forcing them to repeat the school year, and potentially resulting in demonstrations and unrest. Add to this discord two unrelated conflicts over nationalized testing, and the current school year risks coming to a rocky and premature end. End Summary.

Strike Threatened If Bonus Not Paid by May 25

¶2. (U) At the beginning of the current school year, members of the National Primary and Secondary Teachers Union (SENA in its French acronym) launched a strike for better pay and working conditions. After difficult negotiations, a resolution was reached that allowed schools to reopen just one day shy of the deadline to avoid a canceled school year (Ref. A). A new bonus for teachers was the crux of the agreement reached between SENa and the Education Ministry. According to Embassy contacts in the labor movement, many teachers have doubts that the government authorities will keep their promise regarding the bonus. SENa has therefore threatened to go back on strike if they do not receive the bonus by May 25 as promised.

¶3. (SBU) The consequences of even a brief resumption of the strike would be devastating for graduating high school students who are preparing to sit their critical "baccalaureate" exams. Under the UN-administered international standards applicable in Gabon, students will not have enough class time to prepare for and sit the exams if any additional days are lost this academic year. Students joined their teachers in protest during the latest strike, and in previous years student protests over similar issues turned violent.

Other High School Students
Have Additional Problems

¶4. (U) Trouble is also brewing among an additional group of 3,000 private high school students who failed last year's baccalaureate exam. In the past, such students have been permitted to sit the exam a second time the following year. This year, only public school students are being allowed to repeat the exam. There is a

booming demand for private education in Gabon because of the deterioration in the quality of public schools, the frequency of strikes, and limited space.

¶15. (U) The barred private school students have held small demonstrations against the Ministry of Education's decision, and threaten further protests if the decision is not revoked. In another testing-related conflict, the Ministry has been criticized for proposing age 16 as the limit for admission to the nationalized Junior High School entrance exam. Some students and parents have reacted angrily to the proposed age limit.

University Professors Also on Strike

¶16. (U) University professors organized in the National Union of Teacher-Researchers (SNEC in its French acronym) recently joined the fray by launching their own strike for better pay and working conditions. University professors are also seeking enhanced housing benefits. According to SNEC, the strike involves 650 professors employed in Gabon's three universities and four professional schools. Also according to a source in SNEC, university classes have been canceled for the week starting May 18 and will not resume until the Ministry of Education agrees to sit down for negotiations.

Comment

¶17. (SBU) COMMENT: The problems in Gabon's education system have been building for years, and there can be no rapid or easy cure. This is no comfort for students who face a canceled school year, or are barred from taking a required nationalized test. Gabonese students are traditionally volatile, and perceived missteps by the government in handling the education sector's many problems may lead to further protests. End Comment.

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